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ABSTRACT

The study reported here addressed two major issues: (1) what role does ethnicity play in the changing roles and perceptions of grandmothers subsequent to the divorce of an adult child; and (2) what is the effect of this changing role upon the grandmothers' perceived contact with their grandchildren. Subjects were 47 grandmothers from Italian communities in Montreal, Canada. The control group consisted of 27 grandmothers with a married adult child; the experimental group consisted of 20 grandmothers with an adult child who was separated or divorced. All subjects completed the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship inventory. A multivariate analysis of variance demonstrated a significant difference in the two groups' perceived relationship with their grandchild. Grandmothers from the experimental group perceived having less contact with their grandchildren than did grandmothers from the control group. This result is inconsistent with results reported in earlier similar studies, which indicated that grandmother-grandchild contact increased after the breakdown of the grandchild's parents' marriage. The results of the present study suggest that grandmothers of Italian origin, to whom the sanctity of the family is of extreme importance, react to divorce in a manner that is distinct from their mainstream counterparts, and that social services that aim to facilitate adaptation to divorce should be developed with this distinction in mind. (MM)

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The Influence of Ethnicity on Grandparent-Grandchild Relations Subsequent to the Divorce of an Adult Child

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Running head: GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONS

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THE INFLUENCE OF ETHNICITY ON GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONS SUBSEQUENT TO THE DIVORCE OF AN ADULT CHILD

Abstract

Grandmothers' perceptions of their supportive roles following the divorce of an adult child are likely influenced by the ethnic and cultural background of the family. Forty-seven grandmothers from Italian communities in Montreal participated in this study. Twenty-seven grandmothers had an adult child that was married (control group), and the remaining 20 grandmothers had an adult child that was either separated or divorced (experimental group). All grandmothers completed the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship Inventory. A multivariate analysis of variance demonstrated a significant difference in contact between grandmothers and grandchildren in the two groups. Grandmothers of Italian origin react to divorce in a manner that is distinct from their non-ethnic counterparts. Intervention services must be developed with this distinction in mind in order to facilitate adaptation to divorce by all members of the immediate family system.

The Influence of Ethnicity on Grandparent-Grandchild Relations Subsequent to the Divorce of an Adult Child.

With a rising divorce rate, considerable time and effort has been devoted to examining the effects of marital dissolution on the subsequent adjustment and well-being of both the divorcing couple and their children (see Acock, 1988; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989 for reviews). Family transition, in the form of parental separation, divorce, and remarriage has been found to interrupt the emotional, social, and academic/occupational development of the adults and children involved (Forehand, McCombs-Thomas, Wierson, Brody & Fauber, 1990; Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1989; Kurtz & Derevensky, in press; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Although family transition has acute effects upon adults and children within the immediate family, it is proposed that the extended family is not immune to the concomitant financial and psychological demands (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Gladstone, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991; Johnson, 1985, 1988a, 1988b; Johnson & Barer, 1987; Kurtz & Derevensky, in press; Matthews & Sprey, 1984; Thomas, 1990). Still further, it is likely that grandparents may become an essential social coping resource to the immediate family.

A number of critical variables affecting the changing roles of grandparents following the divorce of an adult child have been delineated in the psychological literature. These factors include geographic proximity, custodial arrangements, age of grandparent, age of grandchild, and gender of the divorcing adult. Yet, little attention has been given to the cultural and ethnic identity of the grandparent. The family is the institution that transmits its culture, beliefs, values, mores, and norms (Markides & Mindel, 1987). Each group brings its own unique cultural definitions and meanings to its family structure. Thus, expectations of responsibility and interactions within the family may vary widely among families from differing backgrounds (Gelfand & Olsen, 1979). The supportive roles and perceptions that

are held by grandparents following the divorce of an adult child are likely influenced by the ethnic and cultural background of the family. Of significant importance is the effect of ethnicity and cultural background upon grandchildren's development in divorced families.

The present research attempts to address two major issues: 1) What role does ethnicity play in the changing roles and perceptions of grandmothers subsequent to the divorce of their adult child and 2) According to grandmothers, what is the effect of this changing role upon the grandmother-grandchild relationship.

Researchers suggest that grandmothers serve a large kin keeping role within the family, maintaining ties between generationally linked family subsystems (Duffy, 1981; Gladstone, 1988, 1989; Ramirez-Barranti, 1985). Therefore, the present research addresses the above mentioned issues from the perspective of grandmothers.

Method

Subjects

Forty-seven grandmothers from Italian communities within Montreal were recruited for this study. The experimental group consisted of 20 grandmothers who had an adult child that was either separated or divorced. The control group was comprised of the remaining 27 grandmothers who had an adult child that was presently married. Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Insert TABLE 1 about here

Measures

Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship Inventory (GGRI). The GGRI represents an integration and modification of several surveys developed for use in studies of divorce and subsequent kinship relations (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Kivnick, 1982). The survey assesses variables that are of interest with respect to divorce and family relations (ethnicity, custodial status of adult child, grandparents' age, geographic proximity/mobility, and grandparent-grandchild relations, including contact and support). Measures of contact include such activities as visits and telephone calls, while measures of support include both instrumental support, such as financial aid, child care services, and emotional support.

The original survey that was developed, pertaining to divorce and family relations, was condensed for use with the control group. In effect, the two surveys are identical except for the items that pertain directly to divorce.

Procedure

Grandmothers were primarily recruited from various Golden Age Centres within the Italian communities of Montreal. The inventories were completed during an interview that lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews primarily occurred at the Golden Age Centres or in the participants' homes.

Results

The variables related to contact that were of primary interest in this study included: the geographic proximity between grandmothers and their grandchildren, the last time that a visit occurred between grandmothers and their grandchildren, the approximate total number of visits that occurred during the past 12 months, and the amount of telephone contact during the past 12 months. Table 2 outlines the descriptive statistics of these variables for the Experimental and Control groups.

Insert TABLE 2 about here

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to compare results of the four dependent variables across the Experimental and Control conditions. The MANOVA indicates a significant difference in contact between grandmothers and grandchildren from the two groups, $F(4,37) = 4.52$, $p < .05$. Analyses of the univariate F-tests revealed that the number of visits during the past 12 months contributed most to this effect, followed by the geographic proximity between grandmothers and their children, and finally by the last visit between grandmothers and their grandchildren. The amount of telephone contact during the past 12 months did not contribute to this significant effect.

Discussion

Although the amount of research conducted on the topic of separation and divorce is abundant, only recently have researchers begun to examine the effects of this process on grandparent-grandchild relations (see Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Gladstone, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991; Johnson, 1985, 1988a, 1988b; Johnson & Barer, 1987; Kurtz & Derevensky, in press; Matthews & Sprey, 1984; Thomas, 1990). Furthermore, the research that has been conducted to date in this area has focused entirely on samples of non-ethnic families experiencing divorce within a mainstream context. The purpose of this present study was examine the perceived changes in grandmother-grandchild relations following the separation or divorce of an adult child within Italian first generation families. Furthermore, a second goal was to determine whether the present findings are consistent with those of non-ethnic families.

Results of the present study indicate that grandmothers from the

Experimental group perceived having less contact with their grandchildren than did grandmothers from the Control group. Interestingly, this finding is inconsistent with results that have been previously reported in the literature. Gladstone (1988) demonstrated that contact between English Canadian grandmothers and their grandchildren was perceived to increase from pre- to post-marital breakdown. Furthermore, both Gladstone (1988) and Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) revealed that being on the custodial side after disruption (usually the maternal grandparents) appears to enhance grandparent-grandchild relations, but being on the non-custodial side (paternal grandparents) seems to diminish them. Although most grandmothers in the present sample were maternal grandmothers, this pattern of findings was not replicated.

The Italian community is an ethnic group that highly values the sanctity of the family (D'Abate, 1991). Any force that threatens the well-being of the family (such as divorce) is highly condemned and forbidden. As such, when divorce does occur within an Italian family, extended family members (especially grandparents) may experience considerable dissonance. The results of the present study suggest that perhaps Italian grandmothers maintain a low level of dissonance resulting from a low level of contact. Presently, services in mainstream social service centres are often geared toward the stereotypical senior citizen with the assumption that the "ethnic elderly" will also be served and that few differences exist between cultural and ethnic groups (Markides & Mindel, 1987). If, as this study suggests, grandmothers of Italian origin react to divorce in a manner that is distinct from their mainstream counterparts, then social services that aim to facilitate adaptation to divorce must be developed with this distinction in mind.

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TABLE 1. **DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES IN THE SAMPLE**

	EXPERIMENTAL (n = 20)		CONTROL (n = 27)	
Age of grandmother:				
	M	SD	M	SD
	64.8	10.66	64.37	6.26
$t(45) = .17$, $p > .05$				
Age when arrived in Canada				
	M	SD	M	SD
	29.05	11.06	30.11	7.85
$t(45) = .39$, $p > .05$				
Health	N	%	N	%
Excellent	2	10	3	11
Good	9	45	12	44
OK	6	30	7	26
Poor	3	15	5	19
Total	20	100	27	100
$\chi 2(3, N = 47) = .17$, $p > .05$				
Work Status	N	%	N	%
Full time	2	10	2	7
Work leave	1	5	0	0
Retired	5	25	17	63
Invalid	1	5	1	4
Without work	10	50	7	26
Other	1	5	0	0
Total	20	100	27	100
$\chi 2(5, N = 47) = 8.22$, $p > .05$				

TABLE 1(Cont'd). DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES IN THE SAMPLE

	EXPERIMENTAL		CONTROL	
Income	N	%	N	%
<5000	3	16	0	0
5000-10000	1	6	6	28
10000-15000	3	17	4	19
15000-20000	6	32	4	19
20000-25000	3	17	2	10
25000-35000	1	6	2	10
35000-50000	1	6	3	14
Total	18	100	21	100
$\chi 2(6, N=47)=8.47, p>.05$				
Education	N	%	N	%
No school	3	15	1	4
Elementary	15	75	24	89
Secondary	2	10	2	7
Total	20	100	27	100
$\chi 2(2, N=47)=2.08, p>.05$				
Age of Adult Child	M	SD	M	SD
	39.05	8.86	38.72	4.77
$t(43)=.16, p>.05$				
Age of Grandchild	M	SD	M	SD
	12.65	7.13	10.63	5.70
$t(45)=1.08, p>.05$				

TABLE 2: **DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES**

	EXPERIMENTAL (n = 18)		CONTROL (n = 24)	
Distance of grandchild from grandmother:				
	M	SE	M	SE
	2.83	0.22	2.04	0.19
1 = within 1 km.				
2 = 1 - 10 km.				
3 = 11 - 100 km.				
4 = 100 + km.				
5 = live together				
Last visit with grandchild: (days)				
	12.33	2.76	3.58	2.39
# of visits during past 12 mos.				
	3.22	0.28	2.08	0.24
1 = almost every day				
2 = 2-3 times/week				
3 = once per week				
4 = 1-2 times/mos				
5 = once every 2-3 mos				
6 = even less				
Telephone contact during past 12 mos.				
	1.72	0.10	1.83	0.09
1 = almost everyday				
2 = 2-3 times/week				
3 = once per week				
4 = 1-2 times/mos.				
5 = once every 2-3 mos.				
6 = even less				